



TO: Sen. Steve Cassano and Rep. Ed Jutila, Chairmen,
And the Members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee

Testimony from Rivers Alliance of Connecticut
Public Hearing, Monday, March 14, 2016, on
SJ 36 RESOLUTION PROPOSING AN AMENDMENT TO THE CONSTITUTION OF THE
STATE TO PROTECT CERTAIN PROPERTY HELD OR CONTROLLED BY THE STATE FOR
CONSERVATION, RECREATION, OPEN SPACE OR AGRICULTURAL PURPOSES.

Rivers Alliance of Connecticut is a statewide non-profit organization, founded in 1992, as a coalition of river organizations, other conservation non-profits, individuals, and businesses working to protect and enhance Connecticut's rivers, streams, aquifers, lakes, and estuaries. We promote sound water policies and water stewardship through education and assistance at the local, regional, and state levels.

We thank the Committee for considering SJ 36, and with maximum strength urge your support. This Resolution would place on the ballot a Constitutional Amendment that would provide assurance that state lands held for conservation, agriculture, or recreation will not be conveyed out of state stewardship to another party -- municipality, private business, or individual – without careful scrutiny and strong approval, both at the state and local levels.

For several years, we have tracked the annual Conveyance Act for Rivers Alliance and for the League of Conservation Voters. We are one of the founding members of the State Lands Working Group. About five years ago, together with the Connecticut Land Conservation Council, we discovered that apparently all state conservation lands are liable to conveyance. Their deeds include no barriers to conveyance. Land that people assumed had been preserved in perpetuity, land in which the public had a major investment, was not protected at all.

For two years, the Working Group sought to solve this problem by means other than a Constitutional Amendment. But every option we studied, in consultation with colleagues, state agency people, the AG's office, and legislators, failed to achieve the desired result. The reason for the failure of these options was the legislature's right to propose legislation (including land conveyances) at any time during session and notwithstanding any law that would otherwise prohibit or limit the legislation. Our goal is not to prohibit all conveyances of state conserved lands, but rather to be sure such conveyances are understood by all concerned and deemed to have a valuable public benefit. We regard a clean, healthy environment as a high public benefit.

The proposed Constitutional Amendment provides that:

- A conveyance would be proposed only in its own, separate bill, as a Special Act, with a public hearing in the locale of the conveyance. This would ensure that residents affected

by the conveyance would have a chance to comment before the conveyance is approved. (We suggest adding that, in the General Assembly, the bill's public hearing be in the Environment Committee; however this might better be addressed in the legislative Rules.)

- Funds would be appropriated to purchase replacement for the land lost, in the form of property or an easement. (This language might benefit from clarification. We would be pleased to assist if that would be helpful.)
- The conveyance would need approval of a two-thirds vote in each chamber.

Again, we thank you for this Resolution. We will help in any way we can to assure passage of the Resolution and the Amendment.

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